Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Religious Freedom in Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Executive Summary

Religious freedom in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), North Korea, is an unknown phenomenon. The government maintains some of the most repressive controls in the world over almost every aspect of life including thought, belief, conscience, speech, information, and access to information. It is their control over information in and out of the country that limits our understanding of the extent to which they severely restrict religious liberty. Foreign access to information such as religious demography, the treatment of religious groups, and punishment for religious belief is limited. However, refugees, defectors, missionaries, and limited press reports have proven invaluable sources of information, making it clear that the DPRK does not support religious freedom.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to Current Status

The DPRK pledged in international agreements and in their own constitution to protect religious liberty, but it is clear these superficial guarantees were intended to appease the international community rather than to actually protect religious liberty. In fact, the North Korean government may have signed these agreements solely to maintain the humanitarian aid on which the country depends. Regardless of their intentions, North Korea is not abiding by the obligations into which it entered.

Despite North Korea's constitutional protections for religious freedom, the official policy is to prohibit all religious belief and manifestations of belief except for the state-backed ideology known, as Juche or Kimilsungism. The founder of Juche, former President Kim Il Sung, had the political acumen to recognize that

Communist repression of religion was creating a spiritual and intellectual vacuum. Juche focused on national self-sufficiency in politics, economics, and defense in order to promote Kim Il Sung's political success and ensure his recognition as a leading revolutionary. These ideas are still imposed on the North Korean populace. The immense internal focus of Juche allowed Kim Il Sung to keep North Korea closed off from the rest of the world and to brand all outside influences, such as Christianity and capitalism, as threats to national security. Juche quickly became a quasi-religious cult of personality that venerates Kim Il Sung as a god-like figure, and now the entire Kim family must be worshipped religiously. Kim Il Sung's successor and son, Kim Jong Il, added his own "army first" policy to the Juche ideal making the military the driving force of the permanent revolution rather than the proletariat. Thus, despite its roots in Marxism and Leninism, Juche became a distinctly North Korean product.

Early in his reign Kim Jong Il articulated his views on the practical application of Juche ideology, which included the idea that the people must be independent in thought and economics. Clearly Kim Jong Il and the DPRK government have completely failed on both these points. Not only do they rely heavily on foreign economic and food aid, they also have created a single ideology state where any demonstration of independent thought is severely punished. Prior to the Korean War, the Korean peninsula was home to a wide variety of religious beliefs. Buddhism and Confucianism were widely prevalent in the region throughout the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910) and Christianity's significant presence in the north gave Pyongyang the nickname "Jerusalem of the East." This diversity of belief and acceptance of religious practice was repressed when communist rule began in the 1950s. When Kim Il Sung imposed his state ideology, all other religious groups were forced to go underground.

Other Instances of Discrimination and Abuse

The clandestine nature of North Korea's religious landscape continues today. Government estimates show that there are approximately 10,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, 4,000 Catholics, and 40,000 Chondogyo Youth Friends Party, a religious movement based on traditional shamanistic beliefs, living in the DPRK. However, most believe the actual numbers of religious believers to be much higher. Despite the government's attitude toward religion, a few groups are allowed to maintain temples, churches, and worship centers. The temples and churches are tightly controlled by the state and most are located in Pyongyang.

There are a few Buddhist temples located outside the capital. Most churches must be led by lay people, creating a problem for Catholics, for whom services must be led by an ordained priest. In addition, the services are clearly run by the government as evidenced by the adult only congregations that arrive on tour buses and are kept segregated from any foreigners. Furthermore, these services contain overt political rhetoric designed to maintain government control over the

population. The only Christian group that appears to have an ordained priest and hold official services is the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church in Pyongyang. The church opened in 2006 after Kim Jong-Il visited an Orthodox cathedral in Russia. North Korean priests were installed to minister to the Russians living in North Korea. The Buddhist temples are maintained by "monks," but most refugees characterize these monks as caretakers rather than religious or spiritual leaders. Reports indicate that no actual religious activity takes place in the temples. The government allows their maintenance in part as cultural landmarks, and in part as a superficial attempt to demonstrate to the international community the existence of religious practice and tolerance within the country.

The maintenance and construction of religious facilities is one area in which the North Korean government has generated a façade that it is taking positive steps towards religious liberty. In 2005, the government allowed the Presbyterian Church of South Korea to sponsor the building of the Pyongyang Jeil Church. They also allowed the South Korean group to send a delegation of 90 Christians to the Bongsu Church in 2006 to commemorate its restoration. The North Korean government usually administers severe punishments for contact with South Koreans, but since the late 1990s they have allowed minor instances of cross border religious connections. As a result, South Korean Buddhist and Christian groups have held joint ceremonies in North Korea. In 1997 the South Korean Catholic Fathers for the Realization of Justice held a prayer service in North Korea that resulted in an ongoing cross-border religious exchange. Despite these seemingly positive steps, the North Korean government's draconian policy towards religion brings into doubt the legitimacy of any steps that might indicate the government intends to allow for any degree of religious freedom.

Despite the DPRK regime's severe repression, some religious beliefs and practices persist. Although most of the Buddhist temples are maintained as heritage sites, some reports have emerged of actual prayer and offering taking place, most of it done quickly to escape notice and potential prosecution. One of the most prevalent religious groups is the Chondogyo Youth Friends Party, based on traditional shamanistic beliefs, whose practices include fortune-telling. Divination grew in popularity in response to the famine of the 1990s, and though it is still illegal, many citizens and government officials partake in the ritual. The government does not condone any of these practices, but they frequently are willing to look the other way rather than prosecuting citizens for these beliefs and practices. Christian groups, on the other hand, have not fared as well.

The DPRK regime contends that Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, is a critical element to American imperialism. The DPRK considers the United States and South Korea, the two largest producers of Christian missionaries, to be its two biggest threats. Thus, anything connected to either country, including perceived religious imperialism, is considered a threat to national security. North Korean authorities deal with all Christians and Christian groups with a much

heavier hand than any other religious group. North Korean security forces regularly pose as Christian ministers to entrap Christians or potential converts for prosecution. Once an individual has been identified as a Christian or having contact with Christians they are sentenced to severe prison terms and abuse. Reports from former security agents confirm that Christians are regularly tortured and beaten in the prison camps operated by the government.

In addition to fighting Christianity within the country, the DPRK also has an active policy of preventing its importation. An outcome of the famines North Korea faced in the 80s and 90s was the large number of its citizens crossing the border into China seeking refuge and food. China did not and still does not recognize these individuals as refugees and forcibly repatriates them to North Korea. Initially, the DPRK treated these refugees as traitors and executed anyone who allegedly defected. However, as numbers began to increase dramatically, the government was forced to relax their policy and now sentences food seekers to a term of hard labor.

These individuals are sent to labor camps which are reminiscent of camps used by Mao and Stalin. Punishments range from eighteen 18 months to multiple years. One defector was sentenced to 15 months in a labor camp and describes his treatment as, "[j]ust like animals. An animal without a name. It's up to the condition of the guards. Because killing a prisoner will do no harm for them." In addition to being beaten, refugees also must endure vile conditions. According to one refugee the cells housed 50-60 people with only one toilet. These unsanitary conditions polluted the water leading to many deaths due to disease. Lice were rampant and food was scarce. The food rations were described at "a mouthful of overcooked noodles three times a day," and "heated corn husks in water."

To complicate matters, most of the aid workers providing food just over the border in China are actually from South Korea, the United States, or are affiliated with Christian aid groups. Contact with South Koreans is forbidden under North Korean law. At first, all repatriated citizens who came into contact with South Koreans or church groups received draconian penalties including torture, abuse, and execution. Repatriated citizens are typically subjected to long and harsh interrogation sessions; many of them have learned to avoid talking about any contact they might have had with a church group or with South Koreans to avoid harsher penalties. One refugee explained that she was required to kneel for an entire day and if she moved she was beaten. The guards forced the prisoners to hit each other, and if they refused the guards would beat them. Additionally, the security officers are concerned with Christian religious contacts than with any other religion. One refugee explains that she was not interrogated about any contact she had with Buddhists while she was in China, only Christians, and after numerous beatings she was coerced into admitting contact with Christian groups. Although the refugees have changed their practices, the government and

security forces have not; brutal interrogation techniques continue to be used to elicit a confession of contact with South Koreans or religion.

Repatriated refugees are first interrogated by regular police officers. Subsequently, any refugee suspected of having contact with South Koreans or churches is turned over to counter-intelligence units from the State Security Agency. The counter-intelligence specialists are brought in because North Korea believes that the aid workers on the North Korea-China border are spies for South Korea and the United States. In an attempt to support this claim, the DPRK points to instances where missionaries pay North Koreans to carry bibles and religious literature back with them when they are repatriated. The DPRK claims this is a deliberate attempt on the part of the South Korean and American governments to destabilize the country, which is why possession of such religious literature is illegal and severely punished. In fact refugees were specifically told by security officials that if they brought a Bible into North Korea they would be killed. As it turns out most North Koreans will take the money, but will drop the materials on the ground immediately upon crossing the border. It is clear from interviews with former security officials and refugees that the DPRK is petrified of losing ultimate control over its own citizens and of the possibility of a pluralistic society. One former security officer explains that the National Security Agency specifically recruits people who worked for foreign faith based organizations to target religious people in North Korea. In fact, Kim Il Sung University offers courses on theology specifically to provide security officers with the necessary background knowledge to effectively persecute religious adherents. The DPRK regime has allowed for only one ideology, Juche, to persist and they believe that by allowing for religious freedom the influx of ideas will challenge the stability of the state.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which an underground Christian community may exist. Punishments for any kind of unauthorized religious practice are so extreme that most are not willing to risk their lives. However, some North Koreans have learned ways to operate within the restrictive environment established by the DPRK, and a small but persistent clandestine Protestant community does exist within North Korea's borders. One refugee states that praying or worshipping together is "possible only among relatives and families and no one can meet with other people in a regular place." Some reports indicate there are 500 "family worship centers," also known as underground churches, but reports from defectors do not confirm their existence. It is very likely that while there are high numbers of underground religious adherents, there may be fewer underground religious communities. The government's severely repressive policies and punishments instill fear into the citizens and do not create an environment friendly to the discussion of religious matters.

Despite the government's severe repression of almost all religious belief, they do sanction some forms. Juche ideology is not only supported it is indoctrinated into

all North Koreans throughout their lives. North Koreans are required to maintain pictures of the Kim family and to submit to the state and Kim Jong-Il's supreme authority. The government did allow some religious groups to form during the 1980's as a demonstration of Kim Il-Sung's benevolence, but this was a political move intended to provide a façade of compliance with international standards. Additionally, the government sanctioned religious groups were an essential tool to combat any influence from the faith-based foreign aid organizations that provided humanitarian assistance. All remaining religious organizations are primarily used by the government as an additional avenue to spread their propaganda.

Conclusion

North Korea remains one of the most repressive regimes on the planet. The government's flagrant and intentional failure to adhere to their international obligations is an affront to the entire international community. However, humanitarian efforts must continue. The atrocities the North Korean government has brought upon its citizens are unthinkable and the international community has an obligation to address these issues. Efforts must be made to ensure human rights are a critical component of any agreements resulting from the Six Party talks or any other negotiating forum between the DPRK and other governments. Before North Korea can become a full and valid member of the international community it must implement programs to ensure compliance with international human rights standards.